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## **“Chaste Tree - Something Different”**

Transplanted northerners often lament the fact that they can't grow lilacs this far south. I have even heard stories of a few determined gardeners who have regularly placed ice around individual lilacs in a futile attempt to make them grow and flower in our warm, humid Gulf Coast environment.

There are several different flowering plants that are better adapted to our weather conditions and make good substitutes. The Chaste Tree, *Vitex angus-castus*, would be a good choice. This little tree flowers all summer and through the fall, rarely reaches 20 feet in height and has attractive aromatic foliage.

The 6 inch long flower spikes occur on new growth all during the growing season. Flowers of the standard Chaste Tree are a pale purple, and are about as close to blue as possible. Blue is a rare color among flowering species of plants, so the addition of this color to most landscapes is welcomed. A quick search yielded a dozen other selections of Vitex, including white and pink flowered varieties.

Chaste tree is now used sparingly in local landscapes, but where found it draws a lot of attention. It usually develops into a multi-trunked large shrub or small tree with an open umbrella - shaped crown. The foliage is fine textured, dark green above and silvery underneath. Fall color is bronze or purple.

Well adapted, and easy to grow, Chaste tree has several landscape uses. As a summer flowering tree for fragrance, it can be located near a porch or patio. It can be planted about 5 feet apart to make a shrubbery border or can be used as a freestanding specimen plant in the yard.

Though full sun is preferred, Chaste tree will tolerate several hours of shade each day. It grows in many different soil types and even tolerates light salt spray in Coastal areas.

**More Chaste Tree Tips and Facts:**

- It is in the *Verbenaceae* family. Relatives include Verbena, Lantana and Clerodendrum.
- Relatively cold hardy - though twigs and branches might be nipped by a severe freeze, it recovers quickly.
- Maintenance requirements, including pruning, are very similar to crape myrtles.
- Sometimes called pepper bush because the leaves, when crushed, have a peppery fragrance.
- It is also known as hemp tree because the leaves look a lot like marijuana foliage, even though they are not closely related.

**Question of the Week:** I plan to apply a herbicide to prevent weeds in my lawn this spring. What is the proper time?

**Answer:** First, let's make certain that you need to apply a weed preventative product. Weeds that are growing now, in February, are classified as winter weeds which germinated last fall. In this case a preemergent weed killer would be of little help. Instead, you might need to select a postemergent product that is formulated to control weeds that are already up and growing.

On the other hand, if you have had a history of weeds during the summer, they generally come up in the spring. In this case, a preventative treatment during late winter might be of help. A general rule of thumb for applying preemergent herbicides in North Florida is March 1. The ideal time varies, depending upon weather conditions. A better indicator might be the early flowering garden plants. When azaleas and dogwoods bloom, crabgrass and other spring weeds are beginning to germinate and it is the most ideal time to apply a preemergent herbicide.

**Note:** Some of the preemergent herbicides, including "weed and feed" type products can be damaging to the roots of ornamentals such as shrubs, flowers and trees. Follow all label directions and precautions when using these products.